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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 3867
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KCRM](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: JUMBLATT SAYS RECONCILIATION WITH RIVALS NEARLY
COMPLETE

REF: A. 09 BEIRUT 972
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 14

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: His reconciliation with the March 8 alliance is nearly complete, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told the Ambassador on January 5. While his base had initially opposed his exit from March 14 and his opening to the Shia, Jumblatt explained, they were "getting used" to his shift, which would culminate in a joint reconciliation ceremony on January 10. The new cabinet "started bad" with a tiff between Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Jumblatt ally Transportation Minister Ghazi al-Aridi, but Jumblatt emphasized that the dispute was being resolved by the two sides. Jumblatt's clear goal is a reconciliation with Damascus, but he seemed hard-pressed to express enthusiasm for his new bedfellows. End summary.

RECONCILIATION NEARLY COMPLETE

[1](#)2. (C) His reconciliation with the March 8 alliance following his August departure from March 14 is nearly complete, Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt told the Ambassador on January 5. "Everybody is loving everybody," a visibly relaxed Jumblatt joked before adding that, after his scheduled meeting with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun on January 11, "It's over." When the Ambassador asked about the January 3 dinner Syrian Druze proxy Wiam Wahhab held for Jumblatt, during which both Wahhab and Jumblatt praised Syria and forecast a Jumblatt visit to Damascus, Jumblatt merely noted the quality of the food and the wide range of attendees, including Interior Minister Ziad Baroud and Future MP Nohad Mashnouq.

[1](#)3. (C) After the dinner Wahhab had told the press that Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, rather than Wahhab himself, was the door that Jumblatt would have to pass through to reach Damascus. Jumblatt told the Ambassador that his continued reconciliation with the Shia (ref A) would culminate in a joint reconciliation ceremony on January 10 in Choueifat, the scene of vicious Druze-Shia clashes in May [1](#)2008. While the PSP base had initially opposed his exit from March 14 and his opening to the Shia, Jumblatt assessed, they were "getting used" to his shift, and he could thus now exert control to prevent renewed outbreaks of sectarian conflict. Jumblatt played up Hizballah's invitation to the Internal

Security Forces (ISF) to enter the southern suburbs of Beirut (ref B) as a sign that Nasrallah could not address the lawlessness in the area "despite his popularity and his iron fist."

NEW CABINET OFF TO ROCKY START

¶4. (C) The new cabinet "started bad" with a tiff between Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Jumblatt ally Transportation Minister Ghazi al-Aridi in the second cabinet meeting, Jumblatt noted, although he reported that the technical disputes involved were being resolved by the two sides. The National Dialogue table would likely be expanded, Jumblatt predicted, although its reconstitution would probably be delayed by an ongoing dispute in the cabinet about appointments in the civil service and the security services. A shake-up in the security services would be unlikely because of the need for confessional balance, unless the PM acceded to replacing ISF head Gen. Ashraf Rifi, Jumblatt predicted. Despite the need for electoral reform to allow direct election of mayors in advance of the May 2010 municipal election, Jumblatt assessed that those allied with the mayors of large cities would oppose the plan.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Jumblatt, once the stalwart of March 14, has nearly completed a humiliating round of reconciliation meetings to stake out his new position. Long considered the weathervane of Lebanese politics, Jumblatt's clear goal at this point is a reconciliation with Damascus, and he has been burnishing his anti-American and "pro-Resistance" credentials to that end. Nevertheless, Jumblatt seems hard-pressed to

express enthusiasm for his new bedfellows, and he clearly sees his party's prominence as a leftist, multi-confessional party as reduced in an era of sectarian identity. Despite speculation that he would formally join his former rivals, we assess that Jumblatt will instead seek to maintain an independent position that optimizes his bargaining position.

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